

BIBLE READINGS: Philippians 1:3-11 Luke 3:1-6

SERMON

In the book of Isaiah God declared: "I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight'".

"Prepare the way of the Lord," was the central message of John the Baptist, the one whom God had sent to set the stage for the coming of Jesus as the saviour of the world.

John the Baptist, now there is a character! He went running about the wilderness of Judea yelling and screaming, "Repent, the Kingdom of God is at hand!" and "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his path straight!" John dressed funny, he wore a garment made of camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist. He also ate a strange diet, composed of whatever was around, in his case, locusts and wild honey.

John had something to say to the world and no one and nothing was going to stop him. He didn't care what he looked like. He didn't care what people thought about him, all he cared about was proclaiming the kingdom of God.

John was not your average minister, he didn't behave well, he was not refined or dignified. He did not conduct worship in a nice church or stand behind a nice pulpit and deliver sophisticated sermons to an attentive congregation. No, John took his message to the streets! If John were here today, he would probably be down in middle of Rockdale Plaza. He would be right in the centre of the shopping crowd – wandering aimlessly and glaze-eyed as the holiday muzak oozes from the loudspeakers. There he would be shouting and yelling, "Repent! Prepare the way of the Lord!" Then he would offer to take shoppingbag-laden sinners to the Brighton beach to be baptised with water for repentance. Many of the shoppers would probably turn their heads away or say "there goes another grubby homeless guy who is doesn't have both oars in the water." or as my son would say -"poor guy - the wheel's spinning but the hamster's dead!"

Yes, people today would not pay much attention to John or his message. But that's a shame - we need to pay attention. For John realised that the Messiah was coming and he knew that the prophecy of Isaiah would be fulfilled in him. He knew he had to cry out that "the axe is already at the root of the tree." He had to cry out "produce fruit of repentance." He had to cry out that "the tree that does not produce fruit has to be cut down and thrown into the fire" and that the Word of God was coming soon, in the flesh of Jesus.

Yes, many people today wouldn't pay much attention to John or his message. But we need to pay attention, because John is telling us important things - things we need to know as we wait for the Lord.

He is telling us to be faithful to the Lord and faithful to the reign of God. He is telling us that life can be a wilderness in which it is hard to hear God's word. John is telling us to be prophetic and speak the word of the Lord. He is telling us not to be concerned with exterior things like our appearance, but to concentrate on the condition of our souls. He is telling us to keep tuned in to the reality of God's reign and to tell others about the coming of the Lord, no matter how hopeless we think the cause may be.

There is a story about an old man who lived in the centre of a desolate and hopeless city. The man walked outside of his house and onto the streets and yelled "Love, peace, righteousness!" The next day he would do the same thing, he would leave his house, walk onto the street and yell at the top of his lungs "Love, peace and righteousness!" He would do this everyday, rain or shine, like clockwork.

One day the man's next door neighbour who was tired of the daily yelling, went out on the street and confronted him. He said "Hey man, are you crazy? What on earth do you think you are doing? Every day you come out of your house and yell 'love, peace and righteousness!' Fool, don't you know nobody is listening to you! This city is full of hate and crime and hopelessness, there is no love of neighbour and there is no peace and righteousness to be found, so give it a rest and save your breath! Don't you know that you can't change the world?"

The old man said, "You are right, my yelling and shouting about 'love, peace and righteousness' may not change the world, but one thing it will do is to stop the world from changing me."

Remember to prepare the way of the Lord within your life and in your soul and keep in the corner of your mind the old man of the story and John the Baptist to inspire you. In your own way, go and tell others to "prepare the way of the Lord." Keep at this, for it is your evangelical mission. Keep at it, whether or not you believe anyone cares, whether or not you believe anyone will listen, at least you'll care, at least you'll be listening, as you tell yourself and the world

"Prepare the way of the Lord,
Make straight paths for him.
Every valley shall be filled in,
every mountain and hill made low.
The crooked roads shall become straight,
the rough ways smooth.
And all humanity will see God's salvation"

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